

Recent UN Votes on Ukraine:

What Needs to be Done to Maintain International Unity (Part I)

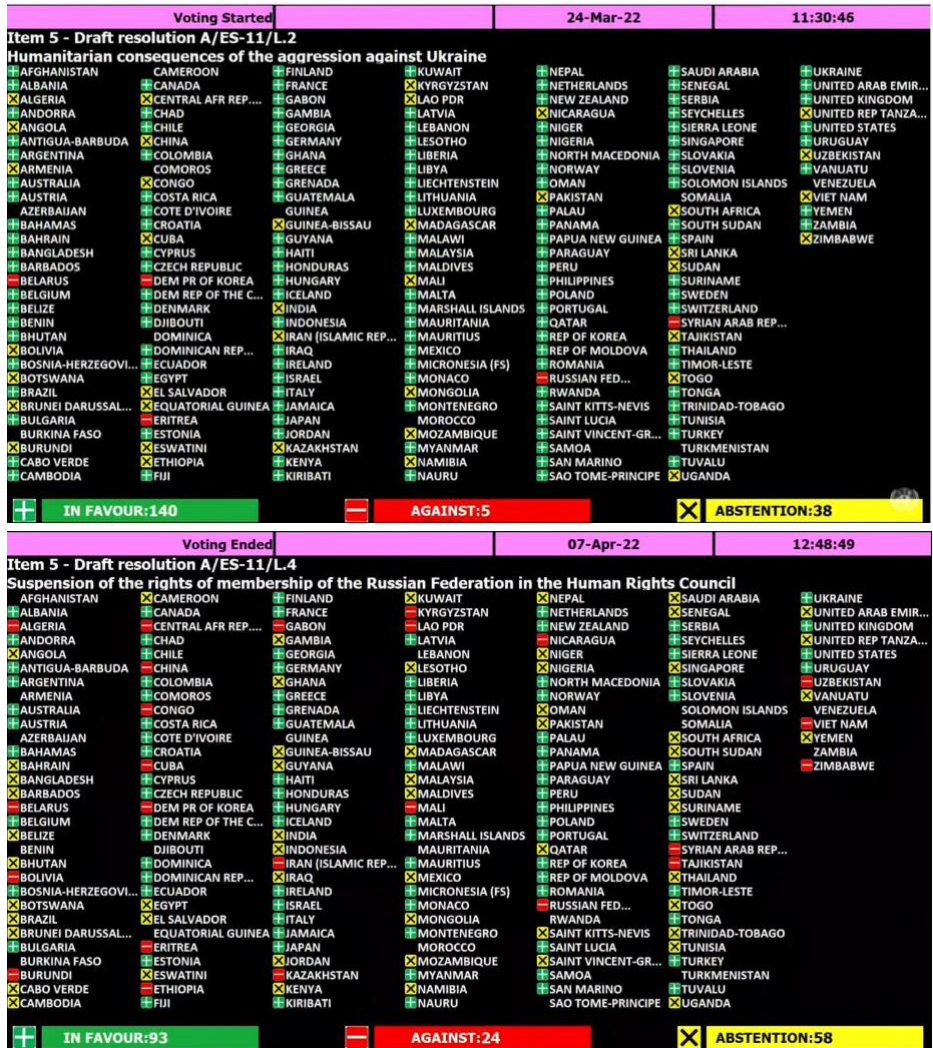
Sarah Cliffe, Faiza Shaheen, Leah Zamore, Karina Gerlach, and Nendirmwa Noel

April 2022

Horrific images of the loss of life and humanitarian suffering in Ukraine continue to come to light, including significant evidence of large-scale human rights abuses. As the war in Ukraine looks likely to enter a period of rearming, redeployment, and renewed attacks in the East, maintaining international pressure for a negotiated peace agreement that maintains territorial integrity and upholds international law will be crucial. This piece looks at some of the dynamics behind recent votes in the UN General Assembly and what it would take to maintain relatively unified international pressure.

The last two weeks have seen three votes at the UN: a resounding majority of countries (140) supporting a humanitarian resolution in the General Assembly after the [defeat](#) of a text in the Security Council; and last week a lower level of approval for the motion to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), which passed with 93 countries supporting out of 117 voting, over the two-thirds required. The resolution passed because abstentions do not count in this procedure: had the requirement been for two-thirds of all countries voting, including abstentions, it would have failed.

Figure 1: United Nations General Assembly resolutions breakdown from March 24 and April 7, 2022



Source: Screenshots from UN General Assembly meetings.

Why was there a drastic drop in support between the two resolutions?

The first and obvious point to make is that the issue of Russia's HRC membership is much more difficult. Recognizing the humanitarian impact of the war is a much easier diplomatic gesture than removing Russia from one of the UN's peak-level institutions. The history of such a move at the HRC is controversial for many countries: the only country to have been removed from the HRC before is Muammar Ghaddafi's Libya, which many countries in the Global South regarded as an act of overreach, and which they saw as coupled with the use of the responsibility to protect principle to justify regime change. In that sense, 93 countries supporting yesterday's resolution is still a large number.

Many developing countries may also have taken the opportunity to express deep-seated concerns about the Western response to the Ukraine crisis. The points below were not (in general) expressed in the formal statements (see our colleagues at Crisis Group for a good [explanation](#) of the overall vote and [the meaning behind abstentions](#)), but have been conveyed forcefully in private.

First, public opinion. We do not have good polling data after the Ukrainian invasion asking about public opinion around the world. But in those countries in which analysis has been undertaken, there are some interesting results. In [Indonesia](#), for example, one study using big data sentiment analysis shows a significant majority in social media supporting Russia's perspective on NATO threats (and implicitly criticizing the government for its support of the first March resolution on Ukraine). Public opinion is a dividing factor in both directions: in some Western countries, people are querying why priority aid recipients abstained from the resolutions on Ukraine—even demanding a cut-off of aid for those countries. This frames an enormous upcoming challenge vis-à-vis the credibility of the UN going forward: if public opinion in one part of the world regards tough action on Russia at the UN as crucial for credibility, but in other parts of the world, by contrast, this is seen as bias and double standards (see below), then international norms will be severely challenged.

Second, principles and double standards. G77 countries adhere to a [strong](#) emphasis on diplomatic dialogue and negotiated settlements of conflict. Many developing countries see hypocrisy in the West's approach to the Ukraine crisis. They draw parallels between the US-led coalition's [occupation of Iraq](#), which is viewed as having been a game-changing blow to international respect for the rule of law, with grave disregard to the laws of occupation (which protect people under occupation, as is the case in Russian-held areas of Ukraine and was the case in coalition-held areas of Iraq), and yet drew no such international condemnation. They are largely unimpressed by European arguments that Ukraine, as a sovereign country, can make any defense arrangements it likes, including pursuing NATO membership: by contrast, some point to [the Cuban missile crisis](#) as an example of how small countries have not historically had the degrees of freedom to make their own defense choices when these are seen to threaten the peace and security interests of major powers.

Third, interests. Food and energy price rises caused by the Ukraine conflict are severely threatening the economic recovery during the continued (if diluted) COVID-19 pandemic. They will increase inequality and threaten social unrest for many countries—high, middle and low-income—and have already resulted in protests in Kenya, Iraq, Peru, and Sri Lanka, among others. Countries also see other aspects of international cooperation threatened, from cutbacks in European aid in order to [accommodate](#) the costs of the Ukraine refugees (which

remains permissible under current DAC rules: countries can charge certain in-country refugee costs for a twelve-month period to their aid budgets, as happened during the 2015–2016 European refugee crisis, when \$15.4 billion in ODA was spent accommodating refugees in Europe), to paralysis in decision-making on other issues in the multilateral system, including peacekeeping and COVID-19 recovery financing. For some countries, [as we have written previously](#), agreements with Russia for the purchase of military equipment and deployment of Wagner Group armed forces also provide a powerful interest.

Fourth, an over-domineering process. It is agreed privately amongst most countries on both sides that Ukraine has done an outstanding diplomatic job of defending its own interests, including the government’s outreach to speak to national parliaments as well as multilateral bodies and its use of video imagery (still unfamiliar in international diplomatic circles) to bring on-the-ground realities to international debates. The Western and Others (WEOG) group and Russia have also been very active in soliciting support for their stances. This is less welcome, and cuts both ways. Russia’s support for the South African–led resolution on humanitarian issues in the General Assembly has drawn criticism, and its direct threats to punish other countries for abstentions over the HRC resolution drew a relatively small number of countries to vote against the text. Its muddled [response](#) to a question of order from the UK over whether it was withdrawing from the HRC was also unusually amateurish for a diplomatic service that prides itself on its professionalism. However, Western outreach on the basis of a “you are with us or against us” mentality has also provoked resistance from developing countries. This is particularly the case where Western countries have not acknowledged any of the double-standard aspects highlighted above.

What is needed to maintain international unity and prevent an escalation of divisions?

The situation is extremely difficult. On the one hand, a forceful rebuttal of Russia’s aggression is seen by Western populations (and some in other regions) as crucial for the credibility of the UN: in a hard-headed geopolitical sense, it is also seen by major and middle powers, as well as smaller countries, as something that needs rebuttal and containment if it is not to escalate into an even more internationalized conflict between nuclear powers. On the other, people in the Global South see double standards and a lack of attention to their concerns: why didn’t the people of Iraq, conflict-affected populations in Africa, and the Rohingya in Myanmar benefit from the same level of attention and sense of urgency? Why were the US and UK not held to account over the occupation of Iraq? Why has the West not supported widespread vaccine equity, access to financing for COVID-19 recovery, and aid to cushion the impacts on food and energy prices of the Ukraine crisis?

We believe that the answer to this must lie in balancing hard-headed contestation with dialogue, being sensitive to the perceptions of developing countries outside the main conflict theater, and showing practical international solidarity that addresses their concerns.

In brief, a package that we will elaborate in Part II of this note (forthcoming) could be adopted by a cross-regional coalition of countries:

- **Avoid any idea of a hierarchy of conflict and suffering.** Russia has committed a major act of aggression: the Ukrainian people are suffering appalling levels of loss of life, displacement, and abuse. Their suffering and their resistance have rightly drawn worldwide solidarity and condemnation of Russia. But other regions have seen conflict and human rights abuses at massive scale, and WEOG countries are not innocent of prior breaches of international law. Talking about this conflict as the single most important peace and security challenge of the last 70 years, without drawing attention to the suffering experienced in other countries and regions, is counterproductive. By contrast, G77 countries relate a positive response to approaches that acknowledge common suffering with conflicts in other regions and some Western mistakes in the last 20 years (Iraq among them).
- **Seek unifying practical action, most immediately on international finance.** The most obvious example of this would be to support the UN secretary-general’s Global Crisis Response Group on food, energy, and finance. Within that ambition, the most obvious actions are to agree that aid levels to other countries will not be affected by the Ukraine war, and to make urgent progress on reallocation of a large portion of the \$650 billion in Special Drawing Rights agreed last year at the IMF to support developing countries—originally intended to cushion them from COVID-19-related shocks, now relevant to the Ukraine spillovers. The argument around this has become highly technical (although the underlying issues are not [actually](#) that complicated). We will address options in our next piece, but the essential message is that at least \$300 billion has been sitting since last year without being accessible to developing countries, and great urgency is needed to galvanize ministry of finance and central bank discussions around this. Secondary actions include coordination to prevent export bans that could spur further global food price rises; and development of a global “debtflation” strategy that considers the effect of developed country rises in interest rates to contain inflation on developing country debt.
- **Think ahead now to secondary impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war on conflict around the world.** We see three areas—geopolitical realignment, including effects on the “frozen conflicts” on the Russian border; impact of food and energy price rises on inequality and social unrest, as noted above; and the unintended effects of small arms flows into Ukraine in the long term, both for Ukraine itself and surrounding regions.

These issues will be covered in part II of this analysis.

All opinions and views expressed in this article solely represent the views of the authors and the Center on International Cooperation at New York University. Support was provided through generous contributions from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.